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# THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT

## I

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PRELIMINARY to any discussion of the strategy of the war, it will not be out of place to remark that in this war the enormous numbers of the opposing armies, the wonderful improvements in artillery and in small arms, the use of noxious and poisonous gases, and of steam engines, gas engines, railroads, tanks, motor trucks, motorcycles, automobiles, electric telegraphy, wireless telegraphy, telephones, searchlights, submarines, aeroplanes, and other inventions and discoveries have had a far-reaching effect in modifying and changing the application of strategical principles. In some cases they have made their application much easier, and in others much more difficult, but in no case have they had any effect whatever in changing the principles themselves. Those are immutable. They are the same today as in the days of Alexander, of Hannibal, of Caesar, and of Napoleon.

To operate offensively, when practicable to do so; to bring superior forces against the enemy at the point of attack; to manœuvre upon interior lines when possible; to surprise and deceive the enemy as to the plans of operation and place of attack; to divide the forces of the enemy and beat them in detail; to operate or attack in such a direction as to threaten or destroy the communications of the enemy without exposing your own: these are the main unchangeable principles of strategy. It is by their observance that the main object of all battles, the defeat and annihilation or capture of the enemy, can best be obtained. They are the foundation rocks upon which all great military successes are built. Their observance shows good generalship; their violation poor. No commander can long disregard or transgress them without bringing disaster and ruin upon his army.

During the war Germany took, or tried to take, the offensive three times on the Western front. She began the war with a great offensive there and continued it until she was forced to take up a defensive rôle as a result of the battle of the Marne. In February, 1916, at Verdun, she began her second great effort to break through the Allied lines, but this also was a complete failure. And on March 21, 1918, she tried for the third time to smash through the lines and to resume a war of movement, but utterly failed in her efforts. In each of these offensives, according to our view, Germany made a great strategical mistake; and it is the purpose here to show why this is so; and to analyze somewhat in detail the operations on the Western front from a strategical point of view.

#### GERMANY'S FIRST GREAT MISTAKE

Although it may not have been Germany's intention at the outset to take the offensive on both her East and West fronts at the same time, nevertheless this is exactly what she did. At the very time that the German armies were overrunning Belgium and invading France, Hindenburg was engaged in East Prussia in a great offensive which culminated in the battle of Tannenberg.

When Napoleon made war in a single theatre of operations it was his invariable rule to take the offensive,<sup>1</sup> but to take it along but one line at a time; and had Germany followed this rule and held defensively the French front from Luxemburg to Switzerland, and then united the remainder of her forces with those of Austria offensively, first against Russia, then against Serbia, she could have defeated and crushed the armies of both in a short while, and then have returned to the Western front and with overwhelming forces flushed with victory have speedily invaded France *via* Belgium, as she had originally planned, or overrun both Belgium and Holland and conquered France. And in the mean-

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<sup>1</sup>It is a well established maxim or principle of war that THE OFFENSIVE ALONE PROMISES DECISIVE RESULTS; but there is another principle just as well established, which limits the application of this principle when war is made within a single theatre of operations, and that is, TO OPERATE OFFENSIVELY AND IN FORCE ALONG BUT ONE LINE AT A TIME. These two principles, which were almost universally followed by Napoleon in his remarkable military career, were several times enunciated by him during his life. In fact, it has been largely through a study of his campaigns and of the methods followed by him in gaining his victories, that these two principles have come to be almost universally accepted by military men as true guides for conducting campaigns.

time, while she was disposing of her enemies outside of France, had Great Britain and Belgium declared war against her, she could easily have held her Western front against them, since neither, at that time, had any army of consequence; and then, upon her return, could have gone through Belgium without bringing upon herself the odium of violating a neutral country.

Since the front between Germany and France was only one hundred and fifty miles in length, and was protected on the German side by the river Moselle and the fortifications of Metz and just back of them by the river Rhine and the fortress of Strassburg; and since the front could not have been turned by France without her violating the neutrality of either Belgium or Switzerland, or both, which it is certain she would not have done, it could have been held by Germany with a small part of her combatant forces, while she was destroying her enemies in other parts of Europe. Had she followed this plan, the war at most would have lasted but two years, and probably not that long. Had she followed this plan, Great Britain would not have declared war against her at the beginning; for it was the violation of Belgium's neutrality which brought Great Britain immediately into the war. Had Germany followed this plan, she would not have turned the good opinion of the world against her at the start. And it was all so easy, had Germany had any strategical foresight; but being obsessed with the idea that she must take the offensive, whether or no, at the very start against France, and having worked out plans along these lines for years, believing that she could conquer France this way as she had done in 1870; and failing to see that Russia's entrance into the war in 1914 made the strategical situation vastly different from what it was in 1870, she swept forward to her ultimate defeat. This mistake, this lack of strategical foresight, this stupendous blunder by the German General Staff was appalling, calamitous, for the Central Powers. It turned what should have been a short war into a long one. It cost the Central Powers billions of dollars and millions of men. It brought the young giant, America, into the war against them, and arrayed against them a world in arms. And what is most catastrophic of all, it has, along with several subsequent strategical blunders, resulted in Germany's practical annihilation as a great military power.

It is interesting to note that notwithstanding the fact that

Germany took the offensive on both her Western and Eastern fronts at the outset of the war, she came very close to being victorious on both fronts. In East Prussia she won against the Russians the great battle of Tannenberg, and on the Western front, had she not been forced to detach two corps from her army just before the battle of the Marne, she would probably have won that battle, captured Paris, and perhaps conquered France before the end of the year. Which goes to show that however strong, well trained, well disciplined, and well prepared an army may be, its commander cannot violate a strategical principle, even unintentionally, without running great risk of serious consequences. It is true that victory will not infrequently be obtained in spite of a violation of some strategical principle; but it is also true that failure must result solely because of its violation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Since writing this article I have learned that no less a person than Field Marshal von Moltke himself approved of the defensive strategy on the Western front in case Germany was involved in war with Russia and France at the same time. These views, reported by Bismarck in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* and quoted by Munroe Smith (*Militarism and Statecraft*, pp. 125-127), are as follows:

In view of our fortifications in Strassburg, Metz, Mayence, and Coblenz, Field Marshal Moltke was so convinced of the strength of our military position on the western front that he regarded it as possible, in case war should break out on two fronts, that we should limit ourselves to the defensive on the western frontier until the Russian war was conducted to an end. He was of the opinion that, with our railroad communications and fortifications on the western frontier, the French could not so conduct the war as to break through our lines; and he accordingly believed that we could carry the Russian war to a conclusion and then first, as against France, pass over from the defensive to the attack.

This revelation of Bismarck, published on January 9, 1893, aroused considerable controversy in Germany; whereupon one week later he replied and at the same time set forth his own opinion:

It is an indisputable fact that Count Moltke expressed himself in this sense, and that he was of the opinion that Germany, in possession of Metz and Strassburg, with Mayence, Cologne, and Coblenz behind, could, in case of a double war, maintain the defensive against France for an indefinite time and meanwhile employ its chief force in the East. . . . We should regard it as presumptuous to attempt to support the views of the great strategist with our own opinion; but in face of the skeptical articles published in the *Nationalzeitung* and other similar utterances in the press, we should like to add that, so long as we are in possession of Metz and Strassburg and so long as we remain covered by the neutral Belgian and Luxemburg territory, a defensive conduct by Germany of the war against France would not deprive the left bank of the Rhine, but only a part of Alsace, of protection by German troops.

Commenting on these statements, Professor Munroe Smith says: "In 1914 the German General Staff, with another Moltke at its head, put into execution an opposite plan. It was stated to be self-evident that France must be crushed before the 'slow-moving Russian masses' could make any effective attack upon the Central Empires. To achieve this object, the cover of Belgian neutrality was sacrificed. The attack on France was launched across that neutral territory, as offering the line of least resistance."

As to the German defeat at the Marne, Lieutenant General Baron von Freytag Loringhaven, Deputy Chief of the German Imperial Staff, in his book entitled *Deductions from the World War*, page 94, says:

Thus the German offensive at the beginning of September, 1914, was not powerful enough to effect the overthrow of the enemy. The intention was to effect an envelopment from two sides. The envelopment by the left wing of the army was, however, brought to a standstill before the fortifications of the French eastern frontier, which, in view of the prompt success achieved against the Belgian fortifications, it had been hoped to overcome. The envelopment of the French left wing was successful up to in front of Paris and across the Marne, but here the German troops found their frontal advance arrested, while they in their turn were threatened with an envelopment.

And again, page 91, he says:

When the German Western army engaged in the Battle of the Marne, its original first line troops had been reduced not only by two army corps which had been sent to the East, but also by two further army corps which it had been necessary to leave behind at Antwerp and Maubeuge.

Thus we see that the German plan was to envelop both flanks of the French army and that it failed because of the "fortifications of the French eastern frontier." That is to say, it failed because of the natural fortification of the Vosges Mountains and the fortresses of Verdun, Toul, and Belfort. But particularly because of Belfort, which commands the narrow pass into France between the Vosges and Jura range of mountains. Had the Germans been able to capture this fortress, the way would have been opened for turning the Vosges Mountains and the fortresses of Toul and Verdun, and the envelopment of the French right wing, which, with the left wing and the little British and Belgian armies already enveloped, would no doubt have resulted in the final surrender of the French army and the capture of Paris.

This accomplished, their next step would have been to cross the English Channel; and with their submarines, aeroplanes, and Zeppelins, to protect their transports from attack in crossing. With no army of any consequence in Great Britain at that time to repel the invaders, it seems not improbable that they would have been successful, although their losses might have been considerable. With Great Britain's poor state of preparedness at that time, and the flower of her regular troops already destroyed in France, probably less than half a million veteran German troops would have been

able to overrun the island, capture London, and conquer Great Britain.

Then, of course, they would have taken over the British Navy; and with the French Navy already taken over, and their own navy and submarines, they would probably have provoked war with the United States and made short work of the American Navy. With it out of the way there would have been nothing to prevent their transports, loaded with their best troops, from crossing the Atlantic; and with practically no army in the United States to meet them they could easily have taken possession of a good part of the North Atlantic seaboard States, captured New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, and compelled these cities to indemnify Germany for the entire cost of the war.

It is easy to see now that at the battle of the Marne Germany was within a hair's breadth of conquering France; and that this would most probably have speedily led to her conquering Great Britain and the United States and her domination of the world. *But Belfort stood in the way.*

So important was this fact, so fraught was it with momentous consequences, that it may be interesting to inquire how it happened that Germany did not insist on taking over the French fortress of Belfort at the end of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71; for had she held it in 1914, victory would certainly have crowned her efforts in the first great battle of the Marne.

The circumstances were these: Paris capitulated on January 28, 1871, and an armistice of twenty-one days was signed, to date from January 31; it was later extended to midnight of February 26. During the armistice, the German army was not to enter Paris. Heroically, Belfort was still holding out.

On February 21, Thiers, representing France, went to Versailles to get the best terms he could from Bismarck. Bismarck's terms were, that France was to pay an indemnity of six thousand million francs; to give up the whole of Alsace and a considerable part of Lorraine, including the fortresses of Strassburg, Metz, and Belfort; and that the German army was to enter Paris and to remain there until the ratification of peace.<sup>1</sup> To these terms Thiers strongly protested, claiming that the indemnity was exorbitant and that the cession of Metz would make the two nations enemies forever. He particularly objected to the German troops entering Paris

<sup>1</sup> Simon, *the Government of M. Thiers*, vol. 1, p. 133

and insisted on France keeping Belfort if Strassburg had to be given up. The discussion lasted several days. Bismarck was obdurate; but finally Thiers' eloquence, emotion, zeal, patriotism, and fire moved him to consult the Emperor and von Moltke as to a slight modification of the terms. The Emperor consented to a reduction of the indemnity from six to five thousand million francs,<sup>1</sup> but von Moltke insisted that Germany must have Metz, as it would be worth one hundred thousand men to her in case of a war with France.<sup>2</sup> As to the entrance of the troops into Paris, Bismarck offered to yield this, if Thiers would consent to give up Belfort without further objection. But Thiers persisted in retaining Belfort. Feeling that to yield it would leave the Eastern frontier of France open to invasion, he fought for it most strenuously, offering even to consent to the German troops entering Paris provided Belfort could be retained by France. "Nothing," said Thiers, in the course of his long and eloquent plea, "can equal the grief which Paris must feel in opening the gates of its unconquered walls to the enemy who has been unable to force them. Therefore we have besought you, and do still beseech you, not to inflict this unmerited humiliation upon the city. Nevertheless it is ready to drink the cup to the dregs, so that one bit of its soil and an heroic city may be preserved to the country. We thank you, Count, for having afforded Paris the opportunity of ennobling its sacrifice. The mourning of Paris shall be the ransom of Belfort."<sup>3</sup> On this point Bismarck finally yielded and Belfort was retained by France. Thiers' pleadings saved the day. With the fire of a great patriot in his soul, his eloquence, nearly fifty years ago, saved his beloved France from destruction in 1914. It did more—it changed the destinies of many peoples and many nations, crushed out autocracy, and crumbled into dust most of the thrones of Europe.

(*To be continued*)

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<sup>1</sup> Simon, *The Government of M. Thiers*, vol. 1, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs of M. de Blowitz*, New York, 1903, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Favre, *Gouvernement de la Défense Nationale*, vol. 3, p. 106.